DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 187 EA 022 973

AUTHOR Ortiz, Flora Ida
TITLE Superintendent Leadership in Urban Schools.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; *Board Administrator Relationship; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership; Leadership Qualities; *Leadership Styles; *Superintendents; Urban Education; *Urban Schools; *Women Administrators

ABSTRACT

The ways in which a Hispanic female superintendent led her school district toward stability and excellence are described in this report, with a focus on four elements that differentiate the work of urban school superintendents from that of others. Four years of data were collected through interviews with the superintendent, observations of group meetings, and document analysis. Findings indicate that the superintendent must attend to four areas for success: (1) the large size and heterogeneity of the district; (2) resource allocation; (3) school board composition; and (4) the fragmented nature of the community. Basic tasks for effective superintendent leadership were identified, which include: balancing the budget; replacing school board members as necessary; hiring additional teachers and cabinet members representative of diverse groups; providing staff development; establishing student outcome targets; establishing a personal and school district image; engaging in an affirmative action plan; focusing attention on program and school sites; and establishing superintendent/board relationships. (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED331187

SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP IN URBAN SCHOOLS

Flora Ida Ortiz
University of California, Riverside

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

This paper has been prepared for presentation at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, April, 1991, Chicago.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

F. Ortiz

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 022 973

SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP IN URBAN SCHOOLS

What are the elements that differentiate urban school superintendents from others? What are the indicants of these superintendents' leadership? Urban school superintendents may be differentiated from others by the size of their districts, their resource allocation and sources, the composition of their school boards, and the nature of their communities. The indicants of these superintendents' leadership are: school district stabilization, restructured school sites, school reform across the district, school district and community transformation, and intentional leadership.

This report addresses four elements which differentiate urban school superintendents from others and describes how one Hispanic female superintendent led her school district toward stability and excellence.

Methodology

The data are presently being collected and this report is based on four years of data, starting from the time the superintendent was appointed to the present when her contract was renewed for another five years. Data have been collected from interviews and files from an Hispanic female superintendent. Observational data are limited to large group public meetings. Documents analyzed include office memoranda, newspaper releases,

school district materials such as board meeting agendas, curricular and activity announcements and correspondence of various sorts.

District Characteristics

The district which hired the superintendent, Dr. Singer, is one of the largest school districts in the state, consisting of 29 elementary schools, four middle schools, three comprehensive high schools, and one continuation high school. The district operates an adult education center, a regional vocational training center, 22 magnet school programs, alternative middle and high school programs, five summer schools and special education schools for infants, children, and adults.

The enrollment in kindergarten through 12th grade is almost 32,000. The district employs over 2700 fulltime teachers, administrators, and classified workers as well as more than 300 part-time employees, substitutes, and playground supervisors. More than 25 percent of the 1,377 teachers have advanced degrees. The total budget for the coming year calls for expenditures above $130 million. This includes local, state, and federal moneys.

The student population served by this district is among the most diverse in the United States. In addition to a large Anglo, Black and Hispanic population, the school district's community is home to a large number of new citizens from Korea, Cambodia, Taiwan, Vietnam, India, Japan, Laos, the Philippines, and Central and South America. The major groups represented among the students are Hispanics, 33.9%; Asians and Pacific Islanders, 27.6%; non-Hispanic whites, 23.7%; and Native Americans, 1.2%.

The superintendent was hired to head a school district which was unstable. The community knew it was bankrupt and that the school personnel turnover was unreasonable and that the students' performance was unsatisfactory. The overall image of this school district was that it was not a very good one. The school board made it very clear to the superintendent that there were four broad mandates they wished addressed: balance the school district's budget, reduce the school district's personnel's turnover rate, improve morale among the members, and improve the students' performance.

The superintendent's assessments of the conditions of district and the school board's and community expectations were summed up by her "Everyone wants improvements. The district needs instructional, financial, and cultural improvements." Her response was "That means to me that I must set some priorities and go to work."

An analysis of the manner by which this superintendent went to work shows that Dr. Singer saw three aspects of her job as primary. The first was that she possessed attributes of competence for leading this organization. The second was that the community held certain expectations for the leader of the district. Finally, she had to understand and accept the board's mandates.

Resource Allocation

Many school districts' resources are generated locally and supplemented by state and federal moneys. Urban school districts tend to have extremely limited local resources thereby depending

heavily on state funds. Federal funds are dependent on personnel's ability to acquire moneys upon request. Urban school districts may lack competent personnel to accomplish this task. In the present study, the superintendent balanced the budget by maximizing sources of revenue and by reallocating the revenue across the school district. The entire school district was made responsible for parity in expenditures and acquisition. This was one form of creating equality across the school district.

The Composition of School Boards

School leaders, especially superintendents, have been analyzed as individuals caught in conflict with the board. Superintendents many times justify their inability to lead on their difficulties with the board. The superintendent in this study initiated school district improvement by conceiving her work as one of starting by picking up what the board and community transmitted. In the process of "picking up" she uncovered actions which had to be taken, decisions which had to be made, and persons who hindered or assisted in the task.

The superintendent in this case, knew that the budget had to be balanced, that personnel decisions would be made and that resources would be allocated differently. In accomplishing these tasks she found out that two board members' interests were not for the school district's benefit but for their own. The superintendent subsequently had these board members replaced. If you recall, one of the characteristics of an urban school is the composition of the school board. School boards tend to represent

the business, professional and middle class community. Urban school boards tend to be mixed representing other groups. These school board members may be suspicious and argumentative. They may also be linked to parts of the school district in non-traditional ways. The point to be made is that at least some of these board members represent constituents who are parents, working families, staff employees of the school district, and groups otherwise excluded from most community organizations. Aside from racial and ethnic characteristicts, board members can bring other attributes which may contribute to incidents of conflict. This particular board consisted of a retired principal and three former teachers from the district. They have been residents in the town all along. Sometimes these members confuse things they have seen happen, have done, and have been successful in with the proposed actions from the superintendent. They get scared about new things and different methods. Two aspects differentiate urban school boards from others. The members may not only represent business, professions, and the middle class, but may represent various ethnic, racial and social classes. Thus, the composition is more varied. The other aspect is that this composition may create two groups within the board with the potential of conflict amongst the board members.

From the data in this particular study, school board meetings could turn unpleasant. School business could be avoided and the superintendent could be hampered in her efforts. Dr. Singer assessed the situation with her board. She determined two board members' interests were in opposition to the common good of the

school district. The data do not show how the superintendent alerted the community. What the data show is that community leaders emerged who systematically informed the community about the two board members' challenges to the superintendent's proposed actions. Ultimately, the two board members were replaced by board members who supported the superintendent's views and actions. The superintendent described it this way.

> Holding an executive position of an organization implies competence and confidence that that person can bring about organizational improvement. Not all board members appreciate the complexity and not all board members are personally motivated to act in the organization's interest. My proposed actions and decisions which were opposed by the defeated board members highlighted for the community the distinction between personal and organizational intentions. I am grateful the community rallied and elected officials who are genuinely supportive of school district improvement.

The basic assumption which this superintendent holds is that organizations are instruments and that "leadership is a willful act where one person attempts to construct the social world for others" (Greenfield, 1984, p. 142).

Superintendent Leadership

The Business of Schooling

Balancing the budget and having a supportive school board enabled the superintendent to proceed with personnel changes. She

began by recruiting new teachers with specific skills and attitudes and placing them in critical areas in order to transmit a certain organizational norm and to reaffirm that instruction and children are the focal elements in the school organization. This strategy was symbolic in that contrary to other administrators focusing on the central office, this superintendent highlighted the function of schooling. Practically, the new teachers infused their sites with new ideas, energy and work norms. The new leader's presence was being felt across the district and at the classroom level.

Student performance became another area to focus upon. The third, seventh and ninth grades were targeted for specific outcomes. Third grade students who are on reading level are expected to increase. Seventh grade pupils are being prepared to pass the proficiency examinations to qualify for high school course programs. The ninth grade is targeted for reducing dropouts. Additional counseling and other resources for students are being provided. Contacts and relationships with parents and students were established to work towards the completion of the ninth grade. The intent is to commit the school district and the community to increase the high school graduation rate.

The superintendent focused on the teachers who are failing children in the ninth grade. In-service training is being provided to improve instruction for this group of students. Dr. Singer expressed her ideas about this.

> The state certifies that teachers can instruct by level, grade and subject area. Teaching credentials

> do not specify that teachers cannot be held accountable for students' performance based on their gender or ethnicity or race. Thus, better instruction to me means that teachers can teach all students well.

To aid in this endeavor, an associate superintendent for educational services was hired. This person came highly trained to provide in-service training, staff development and other teacher improvement strategies. Thus, the combination of new teachers who brought with them professional competence and high work ethic, the new associate superintendent for education services and the focus on student outcomes contributed to another element in the establishment of the superintendent's leadership. Superintendent Singer described it this way.

> I would like a culture of teachers that has a very strong work ethic. I would like to see everybody working twelve months because then you can plan things year-round such as staff development. Teachers who study and remain updated in their areas have adopted a life-long learning attitude. Teachers who trust each other and respect each other create team building and self-esteem. Associated with this, I would also like to see teachers paid higher than anyone else. You can demand more when you pay well. We can, then, have procedures that are fair, ethical and well-known, and in this case reduce

the bad feelings.

What is evident from this urban superintendent's actions is what March (1984, p. 22) refers to as a type of administration which "profits from ordinary competence and a recognition of the ways in which organizations change by modest modification of routines rather than by massive mucking around." The changes from a chaotic organization to one where schooling takes place began by balancing the budget, replacing two school board members, hiring additional teachers, hiring an associate superintendent to help teachers become better instructors, and setting pupil outcome targets.

School District Responsibility

The superintendent's next step was to concentrate on changing the image of the school district. She began by identifying a central office team which would project to the community that "talented people are in the district to serve in a place which is not such a bad place to work." The team consisted of three: the associate superintendent for education services, Pat Yee; the assistant superintendent for business services, Jack Dash; and the assistant superintendent for personnel services, Nancy Johnson.

The team is to contribute to the welfare of the district in several ways. First, the team is modeling team effort consisting of members from diverse groups. Second, the team is modeling competence and how that is related to diversity within the team. Third, the team is projecting a unified purpose which radiates across the school district to provide uniform and consistent

educational services. The superintendent voiced it this way.

> It is my sincere intent to insure that all schools in this district are comparable. I do not expect realtors to refer their clients to any one school because of quality differences. I do not expect to have teachers prefer to teach in some schools because they are better equipped or kept. The team I have working with me will monitor school sites in order to decrease differences among schools.

Projecting a positive image of the school district also involved integrating all of the groups within it. The cabinet was designed to project that intent. Dr. Singer refers to her cabinet as a rainbow cabinet. One of the members is a Chines female, the businessman is a white male, the personnel woman is Black. The women are all mixed each representing more than one culture. The superintendent described her cabinet this way:

> No one can claim any of these individuals. They claim what they can, but they can't get it all. That is what I call softening the racial tension. Let me explain. The Chinese woman has blue eyes. The Black woman's mother is American Indian. My mother is half Asian of some kind. We do not fit any stereotypical profile. We are, nevertheless, identifiable more with one group than with another. The Hispanics do come to me. But by the same token, my husband is Jewish so they know I cannot possibly have total allegiance to the Hispanics. The Chinese woman's

> fiance is white. We are not exclusive to a group personally. So that, I believe, serves to permit people to act more neutrally. While we are claimed by any one group there is not a way to depend absolutely on our inclination to lean towards that group. For example, the white male feels that whites expect him to speak for them. He cannot do that too freely while he is being watched by the three of us!

The selection of the cabinet team carries symbolic significance because as March (1984, p. 32) states, "Whether we wish to sustain the system or change it, management is a way of making a symbolic statement."

As stated before, Willow Creek Unified School District was a district in disarray, a district consisting of many diverse groups and a district which could not retain its administrative personnel. By hiring highly nationally recognized competent individuals and insuring the composition of the cabinet represented the community's diverse groups, a number of symbolic statements were transmitted. First, this district with a negative reputation drew competent individuals to improve it. Second, competence is present in all racial and ethnic groups and school organizations can staff their administrative cabinet with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Third, the care taken to select the cabinet implied an intention of permanence and stability.

What is shown in this case is that the composition of the cabinet and the attributes associated with its members projected

a quality of work life and organizational participation that differed from the previous ones. Dr. Singer, by her actions, demonstrated to the community, in this case a highly diversified one, the extent of human potential. By having diverse groups represented across the district's organizational structure, each group can identify and/or attach itself to it. Students are also provided models and norms of behavior. In comparison to the previous cabinets, the present team members represent the district positively by being personable and professional. Their reputations for competence in their areas and experience serve to justify their rightness for their posts. Substitutes for all of them could be found but as a team they bring a constellation of experiences and personality that is being effective across the district.

The school board's reaction to the team is instructive. Their previous experience with administrators and themselves had been to respond to personal and/or group interests. With the present team they are responding solely to the school district's organizational needs; that is, the improvement of instruction for children. An associated consideration is that the district can lay claim to the cabinet and its accomplishments.

Resources may also be considered the organization's members and the quality of interdependence among them. Willow Creek Unified School District had been portrayed as a district in which racial, ethnic, and group interests continually fractured its structure. One of the necessary steps in Dr. Singer's intention to improve the school district was to develop interdependence among

the members. The most visible and easily manageable group would be the cabinet. This cabinet, by virtue of its composition and its differentiated responsibilities could demonstrate across the district how interdependence works. Moreover, since this expression of interdependence can also be displayed at public board meetings, the community could witness this style of work. Interdependence among the cabinet members served to show how diverse groups' interests in schooling can be integrated in administrative actions to benefit the entire organization.

There were formal means by which the interdependence of the cabinet members was insured. They had very good "buy out" clauses in their contracts. Informally, actions and decisions are coordinated and synchronized among the four persons. School board members cannot pit them against each other. School staff cannot bypass them. Procedures are agreed upon and adhered to across the district. March (1984) explains that "much of the job of an administrator involves making bureaucracy work...and responding to the little irritants of organizational life" (p. 22). The team work which resulted appeared spectacular to the school board members. But by allocating these resources, personnel, in a particular way, the task of schooling could be carried out. It was also shown how resources can be brought from outside and how advantage can be taken of internal resources.

School Site Responsibility

Having budget and personnel resources stabilized the superintendent turned her attention to the principals and the

school sites. Several aspects had to be addressed simultaneously. First, the principals would have to be in line with the superintendent's vision for the district. Second, the schools would have to portray the image that she held for the district. Third, the teachers would have to perform at levels consistent with her expectations. Finally, the students would have to improve dramatically in academic performance, school retention, and general citizenship. All of these acts were consistent with her view of the school district's major functions.

One aspect of school restructuring was the quality of superintendent-principal relationship. How intensively and extensively should superintendents work with principals? Dr. Singer described the dilemma.

> School site management is imperative, but principals' efforts must be consistent with my vision of school district productivity. I do not want a favorite school. I do not want abandoned or slighted schools in this district. If uniformity across the district is going to take place, I am the person who has to insure that. Thus, I have to develop an intensive relationship with principals. A system of communication and interaction is necessary.

Dr. Singer engaged in "executing a large number of little things." (March, 1984, p. 22) with principals. The intent was to create a working group among the principals and to attach the principals to the central office. These "little things" included written communication, acknowledgement of a principal's efforts,

central office reports and scheduled meetings of various sorts.

How do principals and central office administrators get to know each other? One social activity in which principals participated was an eight mile walk in the rain on a Sunday morning. This occasion enabled central office administrators and principals to get to know each other in a setting other than a meeting.

How do school people project an image of stability and integration with the community? The administrative staff of the Willow Creek Unified School District participated in a local blood bank drive. These activities appear trivial and irrelevant when considering school district stability and community support. But the combination and the execution of these activities serve to project certain values and expectations.

Some activities were organized to deal with high priority issues. A voluntary management retreat was held to grapple with issues of student performance, behavior and retention. Those who attended enjoyed and benefitted from it. The issues dealt with were: gang activity, school policies and self-esteem. The retreats were conducted in a manner to project the school district's purposes. Subsequent retreats deal with issues which must be addressed in the quest for school improvement. Representatives from across the district are present. All schools are expected to address the issues publicly so that the total district contributes to the solution of problems and to improvement across the district. All principals and central office personnel know the

status of their schools and they are engaged in efforts to improve the schools across the district.

The most obvious consequence of the above actions is that stability among the group is being established. Principal turnover has decreased; principals are not competing for the allocation of resources. Resource allocation to each of them is designed to improve their schools. Status differentiation among them due to school assignment is virtually wiped out. Most principals are pleased. Veteran principals are astonished by the increase in good will amongst them.

Principals are also being integrated. The group of principals includes women and members of different ethnic and racial groups across the school sites.

School District and Community Transformation

What are the most visible indicators at the local site that indicate that the urban superintendent is affecting them? First, the physical plant and the grounds are being improved. Even though the resources are limited, because the neighborhood has perceived the intent to better the schools, the community members have participated in helping to clean and refurbish the facilities and grounds. Many schools have volunteer gardeners and plant maintenance persons aid in the upgrading of the facilities and grounds.

The community is developing pride in its schools. Prior to Dr. Singer's appointment, the schools were places people avoided and criticized. Now the community is gradually claiming them. Dr.

Singer explained, "The community must feel they own these schools and that they are places to be proud of and to be loyal to."

Because urban school districts consist of heterogeneous student bodies and because minority administrators and teachers need to be integrated, one of an urban superintendent's tasks is to attend to this matter. Dr. Singer accepted this responsibility. An affirmative action plan, committee and officer have been approved. Progress regarding hiring, promotions and integration is being monitored and reported to the community. To affect the school site level, the district has begun a national recruiting effort including the various locations where individuals representing ethnic groups and specialties can be found. The focus is to provide at the school site level competent individuals who represent the racial groups in the Willow Creek Unified School District.

As stated before, a critical aspect in the urban superintendent's leadership is the superintendent/school board relations. Insuring district-wide stability and order is dependent on the working relationship between the superintendent and the school board. The composition of the board changed during the first year of this superintendent's tenure. The new board's intentions were more compatible with her agenda. The superintendent cites an example of a recent incident which illustrates the fragile nature of this relationship.

One board member was ill so various actions proposed were a vote short of passage. The split board took advantage of this

situation. A board member opposing a proposed new hire said, "We have layers and layers of administrative crud. Hiring any more offends me." The superintendent objected to the remark and at the end of the meeting asked the board to meet in closed session. The audience expected the superintendent to resign.

The superintendent explained to the board members how a remark from one of them has an effect. She said

> The thing that is going around here about this administrative crud is creating rumors or jokes like, Where are you? Are you a top layer or bottom? A thin layer or a fat one? Are you a hard layer or a soft layer? It is not funny around here. The board has no right to talk to us that way.

The local paper reported to the community how the board and the superintendent do not get along. That was actually not so. It was just a careless remark made by a school board member. The consequences become serious. The superintendent referred to the incident in this manner.

> They do not always mean to be bad but they are. Sometimes we go faster than we should and do not communicate as well as we need to. We know we do not have a lot of time to make an impact. If we dare stop, something comes in to fill the vacuum and creates a wedge. It becomes real hard to get it back together again. The board is our boss

> and we appreciate that very much. They asked us to come. We are working very hard. People can see that some things are changing. They are hopeful. We believe that we are making an impact.

The superintendent instructs the board to realize the impact of its members' statements. The board can tell the administrators what they want but they have to allow them to figure out how to do it.

What is evident from examining this urban superintendent is that the superintendent's intentions to establish order and stability require attention to every level of the organization. She summarized:

> It is just bit by bit, little tiny steps, but just like bad things get blown up, so do good things. We are just trying to give people good things to talk about. It does not have to be important. It just has to be positive. Make somebody feel good so they will tell somebody.

We can conclude that urban superintendents have to attend to four fundamental areas in order to be successful. Urban superintendents attend to the size and the heterogeneity of their school districts. They attend to their budgetary situation because their districts are likely to be in a bankruptcy state, heavily dependent on state funding due to the weak local tax base. They also attend to the composition of the board. The board does not

only reflect an ethnic and racial diversity but a social one as well. Finally, they must attend to the nature of the community which may be fragmented, and due to its economic, racial and ethnic composition may not be able to provide the support to the school district found in other communities.

From the case just presented, it is demonstrated that the superintendent successfully leads urban schools by accomplishing eleven basic tasks. They are: (1) balancing the budget, (2) replacing school board members as necessary, (3) hiring additional teachers, (4) hiring a cabinet consisting of individuals representing diverse racial groups, (5) providing staff development to teachers, (6) establishing pupil outcome targets, (7) establishing a personal image, (8) establishing a school district image, (9) engaging in an affirmative action plan, (10) focusing attention on principals and school sites, and (11) establishing superintendent/board relationships.

Most of these actions are highly interdependent. Each of these actions also appear rational, simple, and maybe even trivial or naive. The composite of all of the actions result in successful leadership in an urban setting. What is important to note is that heroic, grand acts are not obvious as one examines this superintendent's leadership. Instead, the actions are fundamental such as balancing the budget in order to direct resources for instructional purposes. A supportive school board and the personnel changes, such as the hiring of the cabinet and the additional teachers, highlight the common purpose to which the

organization is directed. The integration of diverse groups across the organization signified individual and group potential and provided opportunitiees for team work. Establishing intensive interpersonal relationships between the superintendent, the central office staff, and the principals bonded the hierarchical levels to each other. The concentration on hiring teachers served to support the process of rebuilding a productive work norm and to reinforce the value of instruction and children across the district.

Stability, a common purpose and hope characterize the school district. The community, the school board and the superintendent are confident the organization is engaged in schooling. The central office staff, principals, teachers and students are engaged in the conduct of schooling.

In the case presented, the community, school board, and school personnel were unable to sustain their organization before Dr. Singer. The organization was leaderless and chaotic. Dr. Singer was hired to lead this organization in its fundamental mission, the conduct of schooling. Dr. Singer as the school district's superintendent and leader, acted to affect the total school district in its function. This case illustrates how organizations are person dependent. Superintendents are hired to lead by complying with the school board's mandate and the community's expectations. The superintendent's own capabilities and intentions are directly related to the nature of compliance. For Dr. Singer, the provision of excellent educational services for all was her priority. Her intentions were fulfilled by focussing on the

general tasks of schooling rather than on responding to individual or group interests. Her regard for minorities was exemplified by surrounding herself with individuals representing all groups rather than by dwelling on board and community conflict.

REFERENCES

Greenfield, T. B. (1984). Leaders and schools: Willfulness and nonnatural order in organizations. In Leadership and Organizational Culture: New Perspectives on Administrative Theory and Practice, T. J. Sergiovanni & J. E. Corbally (eds.), pp. 142-169. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

March, J. G. (1984). How we talk and how we act: Administrative theory and administrative life, In Leadershipo and Organiza - tional Culture: New Perspectives on Administrative Theory and Practice, T. J. Sergiovanni & kJ. E. Corbally, (eds.), pp. 18-51. _